

A  
HISTORY  
OF THE  
IRONBOUND  
CHILDREN'S  
CENTER

by  
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Ironbound Community Corporation.

## I N T R O D U C T I O N

I have set out to write a limited history of the Ironbound Children's Center. Much of what has been written up to this point is contained in descriptions written for funding purposes, and they paint a somewhat incomplete picture. I hope to describe more fully the process of building a neighborhood institution, pointing out some of the obstacles and some of the mistakes, in addition to charting the progress that's been made. In particular, I will emphasize the interaction among parents and organizers and the evolution of a group of parents who have assumed a major role in governing and operating the Center.

Since my "history" is limited to selected topics, I haven't said very much about the growth and development of the Center's educational programs and/or efforts to train young people as teaching assistants. Only in certain instances have I stressed the role of individual organizers, teachers, or parents. Consequently, there are many persons who have been an integral part of the Center's work who haven't been properly recognized.

I hope that a more comprehensive study of the Ironbound project will tell about the substance of their work.

## I B E G I N N I N G S

On April 17, 1969, a group of parents, teachers, and "organizers" met at St. Stephen's Church, Newark, to discuss the idea of having a summer program for children. It was a difficult meeting; many of the parents didn't know one another and none of them had any real knowledge of program possibilities. The teachers and organizers dominated the discussion. We didn't accomplish much that night, but we all agreed with much enthusiasm to have another meeting to make some decisions.

How did the meeting come about? It was initiated by a group of people who had come to Ironbound several months earlier to live and work and organize community-based programs. Some were experienced community organizers from Newark with definite ideas about what they hoped to accomplish; others were young teachers who chose to work in Ironbound schools. Still others were VISTA volunteers assigned to work with community "self-help" projects in Ironbound.\*

It is difficult to state the initial purpose of "organizing" in Ironbound, for there was a lack of consensus about purpose. Broadly

\*NOTE: This wasn't the first attempt to meet with parents and plan a course of action. During the winter a few individuals had attempted to create an "Ironbound Education Association" to press for daycare facilities for the neighborhood, but the organization failed for lack of substantial membership and lack of money.

speaking, the organizers wanted to build a constituency for "change"; that is, a group of people from a white, working-class neighborhood who would come to see themselves as victimized or oppressed by the dominant political and economic forces within the country. One way to do this would be to create local (neighborhood) institutions that would reflect a different set of political, social, and personal values-- i.e., a democratic and egalitarian spirit, a participatory structure for decision-making, a concern for individual needs and personal development.

The organizers believed that educational issues were a good starting point for talking to people and eliciting their support. Furthermore, many of them had an intrinsic interest in the field of education, and one had helped to create a new community school in Newark's Central Ward. Consequently, some worked as teachers and others started a tutoring service at the neighborhood boys club. We got to know the parents of some of the children, and those parents became involved in the April meetings.

The discussion at St. Stephen's was followed by a meeting at the local board of the anti-poverty agency. We decided (more or less by consensus) to ask the state for funds for a limited summer program of recreation and tutoring. Two of the organizers would write a proposal and submit it to the group for approval.

The proposal never was approved in any formal sense. Many of the organizers were simultaneously involved in a primary election, and the work in Ironbound temporarily took a back seat to the campaign. After the election, the proposal outline was rewritten and greatly expanded and sent to Trenton for approval by the State Department of Community Affairs, (DCA). The expanded proposal was then discussed with some parents on an individual basis.

We waited until July for a contract to be ironed out. The Urban Coalition gave us supplementary funds, and we found a suitable location for a program, but the state continued to drag its heels. In late July we held a meeting with ten or twelve parents and drafted a letter of protest to DCA. The letter seemed to produce some results; the contract was awarded during the first week in August.

The program we proposed to undertake was far more ambitious than the one we had sketched out in the meeting room of St. Stephen's Church. Instead of a summer program limited in scope and duration, we ended up with a youth employment and training project that would be "stretched" to provide day care and after-school tutoring assistance. Instead of working to transform existing institutions, we would be totally absorbed in trying to make a new institution work.